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ABSTRACT

Far West School (FWS) is an experienced-based, career-oriented, alternative secondary program. It uses the entire community as a learning resource to enable students to acquire skills and knowledge necessary to adopt and find satisfaction in adult roles. In the evaluation, important hypotheses were that relative to comparison students, FWS students would: (1) show more positive attitudes toward education and careers; (2) develop at least as well in the basic skills; and (3) show more positive growth in self-knowledge, interpersonal skills, and career information/planning. Measures used in statistical analyses are described; some analyses and results are presented. (Author)

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EVALUATION AND RESEARCH ON EXPERIENCE-BASED CAREER EDUCATION AT FAR WEST SCHOOL

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INTRODUCTION

For the past two and one-half years, a prototype high school known as Far West School and representing the Far West Laboratory version of the Experience-Based Career Education Model (FWL-EBCE) has been operating in downtown Oakland. The model underwent an intensive conceptual and design phase, followed by two years of development and stabilization. During the developmental year, 1972-73, the school had 30 students. Enrollment at mid-year 1973-74 was 55 students, who represented the sample of applicants from the Oakland high school population. In the current school year enrollment is just over 100.

THE MODEL

Briefly, the FWL-EBCE model seeks to provide students with a comprehensive alternative to regular high school: a program in which they both acquire credits toward graduation and the life skills and career knowledge necessary to pursue their future goals.

The program is experience-based with members of the community serving as mentors and their work-sites as classrooms. Learning activities are planned and coordinated at the school headquarters through group and individual meetings with the students' Learning Coordinators (a combination instructor-counselor who guides the student through planning and research and who decides with the student what type and amount of academic credit will be obtained).

Student programs are completely individualized and learner directed. They are oriented around student-planned "learning projects," Far West's method of

individualization in which students select, sequence, and use resources according to their own particular interests, graduation requirements, and future plans. In the FWL model emphasis has been placed on one-to-one relationships with individual adults--resource persons--in work settings where they share occupational experience, personal knowledge and skills, and interests. Focus is on career preparation through provision of a cumulative series of planned, personalized learning experiences in a wide variety of life and work settings.

EVALUATION DESIGN

While the differences between the structure of EBCE and that of regular schools makes the program expecially interesting, it also makes it difficult to evaluate. The model is highly individualized and unconventional in its use of community resources, the structuring of educational experiences, and management of student activities. In the absence of proven techniques for measuring such an educational innovation, we relied for the school year 1973-74 on a multidimensional approach involving a variety of instruments, informants, and analytic techniques. Methods of data collection included external observations, written questionnaires, rating scales, interview schedules, performance samples, and various forms and documents completed by students as part of their instructional program.

The design included pre- and post-testing, between-group comparisons, and other traditional features such as the maintenance of two groups designated experimental and control that were selected randomly from the pool of student applicants.

As a basis for evaluation of student outcomes, three major evaluation hypotheses were derived from program objectives.

(1) FWS students will have a more positive attitude toward school,

education, careers, and work than students from regular high school.

(2) The development of basic skills will proceed at the same rate for FWS students as for regular school students of the same age and grade.

(3) FWS students will have changed more, in a positive direction, than regular school students with respect to self-growth, ease of peer and adult relationships, career knowledge, and depth of future planning. The extent of change will be in part a function of the amount of use of learning resources.

Conclusions of three kinds can be drawn from the data collected and analyzed: conclusions on (1) program outcomes (summative), (2) program improvement (formative), and (3) supplementary information derived from research studies.

EVALUATION OF PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Eighty-five to 90% of FWS students expressed a strong preference for FWS compared to schools they had attended previously and said that if again faced with the choice, they would apply to FWS. The major reasons for this preference are that FWS provides much more practical experience and education; allows more individual freedom and responsibility; provides opportunities to learn about occupations; and is much friendlier, has less conflict than regular schools. When asked to give an overall judgment of their school, more FWS students (75%) than control students (29%) had an unqualified positive judgment; more control students (50%) than FWS students (none) had an unqualified negative judgment.

Parents' overall opinions were almost unanimously positive about Far West School and the effect it was having on their children. They perceived their

children as being more interested in school, working harder, more responsible, more confident, more mature in general, more motivated, and doing a better job than they have done before. Although parents are highly supportive of EBCE and appreciate the way EBCE inspires new enthusiasm in students about school, they still expect students to learn basic skills and acquire the normal subject-matter knowledge.

Despite the fact that the remedial portion of the basic skills program was not fully in place until spring 1974, and the primary emphasis of the program was on skills acquisition through field experience, the learning of basic skills did not suffer from the absence of the traditional classroom. There was no significant difference in performance on the Iowa Test of Educational Development between the experimental and control groups.

On the basis of a writing-sample judgment of quality by independent readers, Far West students showed quite a significant increase in their knowledge of mechanics of writing, their ability to communicate effectively in writing, and the maturity of their written thought. When students rated their school with respect to help received in improving writing, FWS and comparison students did not differ significantly. From available data, it seems clear that FWS students do improve their writing skills, but there is no reasons to assume that FWS is either more or less effective than comparison schools in this regard.

The EBCE program appeared to be successful in providing students with opportunities for growth in the areas of self-development and interpersonal skills. Students and resources alike were enthusiastic about this aspect of the Far West School program.

Resource persons, in their ratings of effectiveness of 15 aspects of the program, ranked "work with others" and "improve interpersonal and social skills" as among the most effective.

Far West students show more variability in reporting their future plans than do control students. They are more inclined to change their plans and to consider a wide variety of options. Many FWS students have shifted their plans in the direction of "keeping their options open" by continuing education or training. The percentage of comparison students who had apparently chosen specific jobs was significantly higher than was the FWS student percentage.

The three major hypotheses on student outcomes were supported by the data.

EVALUATION FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

Program development and formative evaluation during FY74 have resulted in a documented model for the FY75 performance test. Certain program components (e.g., diagnosis, orientation, guidance) were found to be not adequately implemented during the 1973-74 development year. Formative evaluation resulted in identification of some deficiencies and revisions were made in model procedures and products. The formative evaluation effort coupled with program development helped to move the model toward sufficient stability to merit a performance test in 1974-75.

Procedures for locating, developing, and maintaining resources were quite successful. The number of resources increased from 77 to 152 during the twelve-month period ending August 31, 1974. Indications are that future EBCE programs can maintain sufficient pools of resources to provide necessary learning opportunities to their students.

Communication between FWS and the various elements of the community, however, was judged to be less than adequate. Resources cite inadequate feedback about the results of their interactions with students; parents cite few meetings with staff and infrequent reports on the progress of their sons/daughters. As a result of these sentiments, a resource analyst was added to the

instructional staff and staff-development sessions were held during the summer in which emphasis was placed on staff-resource and staff-parent communications.

SUPPLEMENTARY STUDIES

Through analysis of the variety of summative evaluation data, we found out that the major objectives were met to the extent predicted and that the program appeared to be working quite well for students. But we really wished to know more than that, to get a more concrete understanding of what was happening, how students were learning, why it was working. Also, from formative evaluation efforts we found some deficiencies and we found that there were certain discrepancies between the model as designed and FWS in actual practice that were not easy to account for. Although there is substantial agreement, why the discrepancies?

These questions stimulated several studies that were more like research than evaluation. Three of these studies were particularly interesting. In one of them we wanted to step back and get a description of the Far West School from a fresh perspective, one that was "model free." It was therefore decided to bring in anthropologists from Stanford University to conduct an ethnographic study to define what was actually taking place at the school from the perspective of the students. Two graduate students, working under the supervision of Stanford anthropology professor George Spindler, spent some 100 hours of field work observing the interactions among students, staff, and resource people in the community. They followed a number of students through their daily activities in and around Far West School. The paper summarizing their results is called "Anthropological Perspectives of Far West School and Students" and contains a number of insights about the program.

One of the most emphatic findings in the study was the importance of the FWS learning center itself as a learning environment where students exchange insights, information, and ideas about experiences in the community. They found that "experienced students were effective in preparing novices to deal with resources and resource people that they would meet, and that students seemed to give and receive information without the competitiveness, secrecy, and withholding that often mark relations in the traditional classroom setting." They were much impressed by the amount of learning that appears to take place within the peer context or network--an observation that was really not picked up from the other data-collection methods.

They found little homogeneity in the resource people and what they demand of a student, and they said this was occasionally disorienting. Far West students tended to be able to direct the situation in such a way that their own goals could be met, however.

A second study explores student-treatment interactions. During end-of-year testing, the FWS students were asked to rate 26 features of the Far West School program. Each item was rated on a five-point scale from "not at all successful for you" (value = 1) to "very successful for you" (value = 5). Data provided from analysis of this rating scale were used both for study of program effectiveness and, when combined with information on student characteristics, for study of student/program interaction effects.

A cluster of "people and planning" features is positively associated with students who make heavy use of internal and external resources. Features that might be characterized as "turning on" to learning are associated with young students who entered with a low GPA. Another set of features that seem to consist in "going through the motions" is associated with students who earned few credits in the spring semester. These are only hypotheses and only a

beginning of a longer term effort to define a core curriculum that is used "successfully" in differing configurations by different students.

A third study addressed some of the same questions of why the model works and why the discrepancy exists between the model as designed and the operating system of the school. One hypothesis regarding the discrepancy is that philosophic differences exist among key staff members and that these differences led to different interpretations of the adopted procedures.

In an effort to identify staff biases on issues of educational philosophy, a rating scale was constructed and administered to ten key members of the FWL-EBCE staff. The rating scale was adapted from the 31 Postman and Weingartner Conventions, which have to do with such general factors as the variety of options open to students, freedom of student choice, utility and relevance of what is learned, commitment to and accountability for reaching prescribed goals, breadth of community participation; and internal, non-authoritarian relationships among participants.*

Two versions of the same 31-item scale were prepared and administered to seven members of the staff responsible for model design and three Learning Coordinators representing the school operation. In the "Ideal" scale, respondents were asked to rate each item with respect to an ideal EBCE program. A seven-point scale was used; 7 meant that an item is "essential" and 1 that it is "totally unacceptable."

In a second version, the "Actual" scale, respondents were asked to rate each item on the extent to which it had been adopted and put into practice at Far West School. A 7 meant "widely practiced" and a 1 meant "not practiced at all."

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*Postman, N. & Weingartner, C. The School Book (New York: Delacorte Press, 1973).

Results with the Ideal scale were that there was substantial agreement among staff with the Postman-Weingartner position (conventions). Differences between the Learning Coordinator group and the design group were insignificantly small.

With use of the Actual scale, a significant difference in their perceptions in practice was found between the LC group and the design group. LCs tended to give higher ratings. Differences between the three Learning Coordinators were large enough to be statistically significant, as were differences between members of the design group.

A low, positive correlation was found between the two scales. Between the LC group and the design group there was a moderate correlation. The two scales are substantially independent.

It appears possible that the gaps identified between the model and its implementation stem to an extent from differences in philosophical positions on education held by various members of the project staff. Results of the ratings have been used as a framework and point of departure for arriving at common definitions and agreements regarding the model.

CONTINUING EVALUATION--1974-75

The internal staff evaluation during FY75 is being conducted in cooperation with a concurrent evaluation by an external contractor. Again the design uses an experimental group and a control group chosen randomly from applicants. Should the evaluation of FWS verify the hypotheses stated, it would demonstrate that a substantial number of students, now "turned-off" by high school, could achieve at a higher rate in a program organized around key characteristics: (a) experience-based, (b) career-oriented, (c) student-centered, (d) concerned with exposing students to the ideas, skills, and personalities of working adults.